



School use of learning platforms and associated technologies – Case Study: Secondary School 4

School use of learning platforms and associated technologies

Case Study: Secondary School 4

Contents

1. The school and the school community	3
2. How the learning platform is used.....	5
3. Benefits of using the learning platform.....	14
4. Challenges and solutions	20
5. Drivers	21
6. Conditions for success.....	21
7. Lessons learnt and future plans	22

Secondary School 4

This case study is part of a suite of 12 case studies which inform the benefits identified in the main report and should therefore not be read as a stand-alone.

1. The school and the school community

The school is a well-established 11–18 mixed secondary school with a large minority ethnic intake in a relatively working-class area of Birmingham. It has nearly 1,500 learners on roll, including a small sixth form. The school is a Technology College and has been at the forefront of technology initiatives for many years. It is also part of a federation and has a very experienced Headteacher who used to be the Deputy Head but has also been Head of the Federation partner school. It achieves outstanding added value and has performed very well in national tests. Almost every area was described as outstanding in the last Ofsted inspection (January 2009).

The school operates a college system which is equivalent to having ‘houses’; it has integrated cross-year tutor groups of 14 learners in each, which is said to foster the civic values of the older learners. “Some of the stropky Year 11s get to be uncle or aunty to the younger children” (Assistant Head). This was a decision taken by the Senior Management Team and then rolled out without too much discussion across the staff body because “there might have been too many delays and dissenters” (Assistant Head) but tutor-time now for most teachers is said to be one of their “favourite bits of the day”. Lessons are timetabled in two and a half-hour blocks with a concentration in core subjects such as English and maths, because of GCSE requirements. In an effort to promote sharing of ideas and data about learners’ progress in these core subjects, English and maths rooms have all been placed side by side on the same long corridor.

The school buildings are old and rather difficult to work in for some staff and there is not enough space to have a staffroom, which reduces the sense of staff collegiality. The staff and leadership team feel that the local authority does not reward its good performance but instead penalises the school financially for being successful academically. Keeping technology up to date is expensive and in an old building this is even more difficult. Learners report that technology, and particularly the internet, sometimes does not work except in ICT rooms. There are some learners in the school who require more support than others in terms of their learning and/or behaviour. In line with other technological enhancements, the school has a state of the art thumb-print scanner payment system for school dinners to expedite and reduce queues. It generally works but has been known to malfunction. There is a large Senior Management Team in the school, consisting of several Deputy Heads, the Headteacher, an Executive Head, Heads of College and the Assistant Headteacher.

The school has ten dedicated ICT rooms which are solely used for the teaching of ICT. There are also ten laptops in every teaching room which are maintained by the school but not sent home. These laptops are not as much used for after-school activities but the ratio in school is quite high: 800 laptops for 1500 children. About 90 per cent of learners according to 'an internal survey' have access to the internet (and thus to the school intranet) from home. This does not necessarily mean that they have broadband access, as learners pointed out when asked about their connections at home which can be, like the school connection, 'slow or erratic'. One of the key learning strategies adopted by the Senior Management Team across the school is the use of the available laptops in a carousel system, with some learners using them while others do offline activities; this means that there is less pressure on the use of the laptops, despite there being one laptop per two children in the school, and in theory, learners do not have to wait their turn. In practice, some of the laptops are quite old and do not start up quickly, while others have difficulty connecting to the wireless internet and quite a bit of waiting can be done both by staff and learners. The school was an early adopter in relation to home access, and started leasing laptops to learners ten years ago.

"It's a fantastic idea, every learner one laptop, it sounds fantastic like a groundbreaking idea." (E-learning Coordinator)

However, the laptops became obsolete, they got broken, they wouldn't start up, no one had the resources to repair them, or learners forgot to bring them in for repairs; then teachers wasted time in class by having set up activities which couldn't run because half the learners didn't have their laptops with their work on and the other half were frustrated and bored.

"It got very messy. A lot of lessons were learnt." (E-learning Coordinator)

2. How the learning platform is used

General observations

The E-learning Coordinator has been at the school for over a decade, also acting as Network Manager. He has overseen the school's latest learning platform, a commercial solution, in the last year. He has previously taken the school through a number of iterative attempts at implementing different learning platform solutions and describes the school as having been on "an interesting journey with technology". Six years ago the school was trialling a number of solutions, both Open Source and commercial, and the selected alternatives to the current learning platform were used for a number of years. The local authority recommended the previously adopted solution but did not supply or support it. The e-learning team and some technology-savvy teachers who acted as champions played with it but didn't have the resources or the time to customise it in ways that would make it relevant. The e-learning team changed the visuals as much as they could to appeal to learners, but suggested that that did not amount to much. The previous solution suggested by the LA was nevertheless extended across the school in line with the leadership team's core values in relation to technology, which saw it as a pillar of both staff and learners' learning and progress. Some faculties used and explored the possibilities of the predecessor to the current learning platform as a teaching and learning tool much more than others – English and science were particularly heavy users because of their staff and their 'champions':

"It's not about ease of use, it's not about what makes common sense, it's not about what's good for the students, it's totally about the staff – if they like it they'll jump on it and then it'll grow and grow and grow." (E-learning Coordinator)

Pedagogy continued during this period in much the same way as previously, with the learning platform acting as a large storage area for some teachers' resources. Eventually this became increasingly cluttered with staff resources and with different versions of the same document – it was used unevenly by staff and very randomly by learners, with the school's email system showing exceedingly heavy traffic:

"This 'mass document repository' was not really giving the students much, because students had already had access to the common drive. It was dull, dull, dull, especially for the Year 7s and 8s, who didn't get it; they wanted more." (E-learning Coordinator)

The functionality of the previous learning platform was an issue for the school, which the current learning platform addressed:

"It just never seemed to work for me. It just didn't seem to work. Like, you know, trying to add things from home, you would always run into problems and you

couldn't open certain permissions, and stuff. It just didn't seem to join up as well as the current learning platform does, in terms of having the faculty drive and the home drive available from home, so it does really help them, you know. I think I use this version as, like, my port of call from home, more than, well, I definitely do more than I used to with its predecessor.” (Teacher)

The next step in the school's learning platform 'journey' occurred incidentally, when a demonstration of the current learning platform was witnessed at the annual BETT event and enquired about because of its affordances – such as the visual design (which was considered to be child-centred) and the social network features such as the individual profiles. A year later, as the learning platform provider had developed its product further, the school decided to adopt it and it is now being rolled out for all learners and staff. Lessons learnt from the changeover to the current learning platform are interesting:

“The good thing about the previous learning platform was the sense of ownership that staff had. We've gained in the visual aspect with the new model but we've lost that interactability that was there, so that is something we are trying to put back.” (E-learning Coordinator)

The current learning platform solution adopted by the school has been fully up and running for six months with learners and resources being transferred across from its predecessor. However, some staff are doing this more slowly than others. Saliently, the current learning platform has been customised by the school's e-learning team after discussions with staff and learners so that each year group and each college has a distinct and relevant entrance page with notices that are relevant to them; this is based on 'website culture' which acknowledges that resources are often just scanned rather than read, so important things are signalled visually. This strategy of customisation is described as having been “very successful and of huge value”.

The management style of the school is termed “democratic for the most part” with lots of consultation and representation, especially when it comes to issues related to technology and learning; although when it comes to decisions on issues that are seen as integral to the school's vision and pedagogic approach, “it could be termed autocratic” (Assistant Head). Most staff members are thought to accept this balance, though obviously there is “some unhappiness at times” (ICT Champion).

“A lot of things are put out there for discussion and consultation and things, but some things, you know, the Head and Deputy Head do just take that decision to sort it out, which I understand. I'm a Head of College, which means, pastorally I have a little bit of responsibility, and I feel like, you know, I've only had that role six or seven weeks, or whatever it is, but I feel like I have a responsibility to make decisions on my own within that, to an extent. As long as they're not

going to massively impact on other colleges and the whole school system, I feel like within my college it's mine to decide how I do things.” (Teacher)

Management and administration

Network drives are used for managing information. A phone record for a college is kept with information on staff contacting parents about their child's behaviour or other matters. The school MIS is also used by teachers and tutors for registration and this is followed up by a truancy call. Attendance and behaviour data is also kept in the MIS and a Data Manager does the analysis and feedback to heads of colleges or teachers about the data. A staff member referred to the complexity of the MIS as a system but also cited its usefulness for getting information.

“If something has come to my attention about a student. If their attendance is being questioned. If their lateness has been queried by somebody, or if somebody says they've been behaving badly or something, then the MIS is my port of call to grab all that information. We have a Data Manager, as well. He takes stuff directly from the MIS, which can be a little bit awkward, I think, to navigate around sometimes, to gather information about groups of students, and it can feel a bit like you're going in and out of things. But as far as I can see, he has the ability to be able to go into it on a different level than we do. He does things by request, to be fair, if we ask him for it. You know, like college attendance for the first half term, and he can pull that up really quickly, whereas I don't think it's easy for me to pull that information up on the MIS. I can pull up individual students, but I can't really pull it up very simply.” (Teacher)

Curriculum and teaching

Staff members report using the platform to make lesson materials available for learners, to assign tasks and provide links to other websites.

“They can go straight into MyMaths through the main Internet, but we have our own school subscription to MyMaths, and there are groups on there, so I can set my class a task, a GCSE sort of task, something they can go on and it monitors how they get on with that.” (Teacher)

Resources are organised in 'folders' in many subjects, and research with learners undertaken via in-school questionnaires shows that this has been successful in aiding their understanding and “proving that visually this makes a huge difference to how the learners remember stuff” either from school or home as well as when learners show parents their work.

The civic uses of the learning platform in this school stand out particularly. TAG is a new initiative which has each teacher running a Friday afternoon lesson per fortnight on their hobby. There are dozens of clubs and the children get in on a first come, first

served basis with older learners getting first choice as they will be leaving the school. Learners appear really excited and motivated by this, although there is competition for resources in some of the clubs and others do not have enough places. While the learning platform is not used to actually run the clubs, it helps to showcase what is on and to enable choices that would not otherwise be made. Staff members interviewed agree that there has been an “improved uptake and organisation” since the learning platform was used to advertise and showcase events.

There is also a civic charity initiative enabled on the learning platform between the colleges via an inter-college ‘championship’ where the different colleges compete to collect money for children in need. Relevant information and success stories are also disseminated via the learning platform.

“It looks good, and they’ve got this new thing called the ICC which is an Inter College Championship I think. It’s basically trying to get people’s like talents, and what they’re good at. So it’s like, for every college, the college that raises the most money, because you have a non-uniform Friday and give a pound each. So the college that raises the most money, they get the most points and then they get seven people to be able to compete.” (Learner)

While updating and reading college statuses online, learners become aware of the civic and social activities offered in their year group or by their college and, according to a Head of College, more of them choose to get involved than used to before these things were customised via the current learning platform.

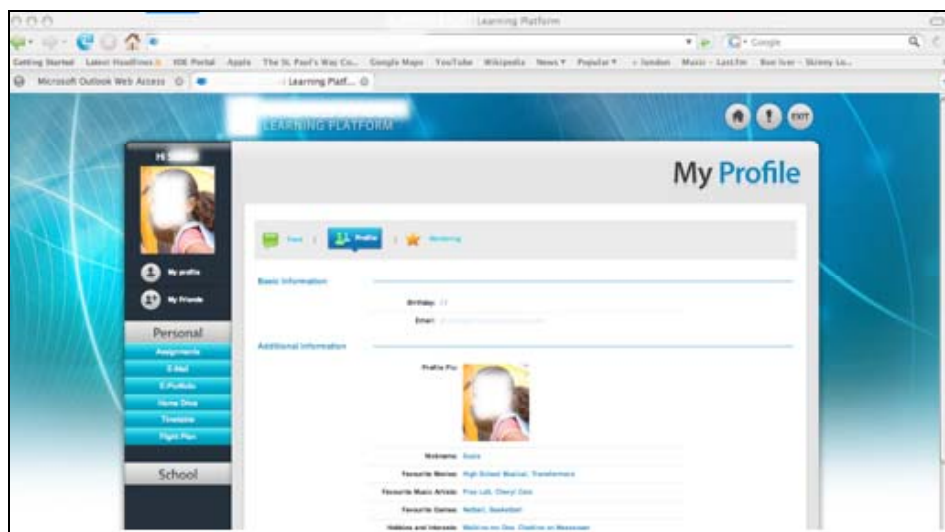
The teachers “sometimes” listen to Student Voice – either offline or via the learning platform as there is a ‘Have your Say’ drop box on the learning platform home page – but they don’t always listen on substantive issues and, although the school is well-liked and the teaching generally seen to be good, the compromises arising are not always perceived positively from the learners’ points of view.

Email continues to be a really embedded method of communication in the school both between managers and staff and between parents and the school and for submitting coursework.

Learning and learners

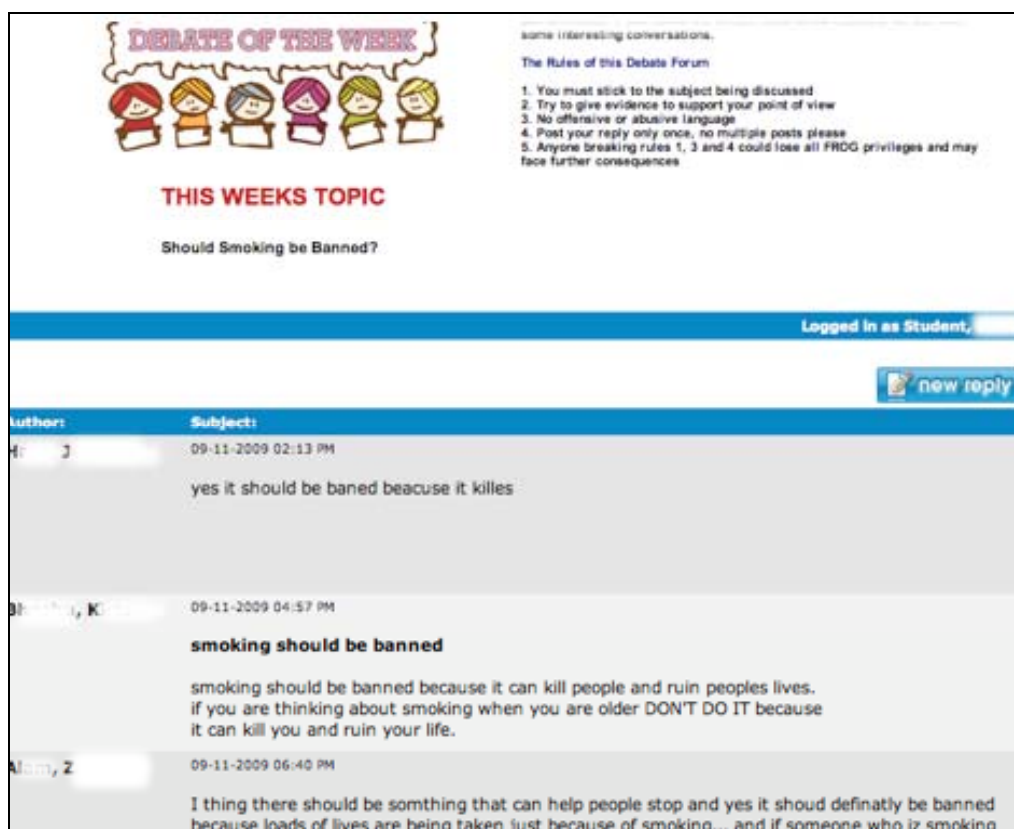
The learning platform is mainly used as a personal space for learners, where they can find information about their daily lessons, dinner money and other things.

Learners perceive the learning platform profile as being quite powerful in terms of holding information about them: things on your online reports “are going to go on your reference if you’re going to get a job” (Year 8 learner). They enjoy the fact that they can customise their profile and this allows them to feel that they have ownership of the space on the VLE and that they can use it as they want.



A student profile page on the VLE

One class has developed 'a debate of the week' around various themes



Learners can create their own websites and contribute to forums and blogs on the VLE.

“Once it looks cool, everyone’s does it.”

“Me? I just like editing my stats, going on my H drive, playing games.”

(Learners)

“It’s just your thing. It shows you all your levels and where you’re at and how much dinner money you have left and your attendance. You can have pictures and stuff, like your profile picture.” (Learner)

Interviewer: So you made a kind of skateboarding website?

“Yes, kind of like that.”

“It’s his favourite thing so he thinks he’s really good at it.”

“No, it’s just for your friends.”

(Learners)

“It’s just like Facebook to me. It’s got like a little status bit on as well where you can write like what lesson you’re in, and who you’re with and that.” (Learner)

Communication between learners has been improved through the personalised interface they have on the VLE that allows them to update their status and comment on other learners’ status.

Email is used for submitting work and for communication. Resources (such as presentations from a lesson or exam preparation materials), online objectives (rubrics) that are levelled and worksheets with questions are collated on the VLE for learners to access. Some learners particularly mentioned the resources for languages (English, Spanish, French and German), which involve them in interactive activities.

“So if you click on Spanish it will ask you a question and they play like word searches, and puzzles, and you have to type in the answer in Spanish.”

(Learner)

In the civic subjects ‘Globality’ and ‘Discovery’ learners get to work together on projects in groups via the VLE. They can find out information, share this, chat to each other via email and submit a joint project that has individual learning pathways marked on the provided objectives grid, which shows what their learning objectives are and whether they think they have achieved them.

In their use of the platform, learners are aware that they have to behave appropriately and that they are monitored.

“There’s the ICT support downstairs, and when you send an email they will automatically get it, so they know if you’re swearing and everything.”

“It has a kind of, like a Facebook sort of element to it, a status symbol.”

“I think it monitors the swearwords, and the bullying and that.”

“It has like, tabooed. Some words are tabooed.”

(Learners)

ICT skills are taught separately but are also blended into other subjects.

“We don’t have ICT lessons. But in Discovery, there’s a part of it where we actually have to use the computers. So like in our being a Wasp project, we had to do a photo story. So we had to go upstairs into the ICT in the end and middle of the lesson, and go up. And then we had to like work on that.” (Learner)

“But sometimes we have like, mainly in Discovery we have like, because if you have a double lesson, two and a half hours, mainly in that two and a half hours we have like an hour of ICT, to do like... what’s this called... private picture thing that you record.” (Learner)

Digital literacy skills, for example, critical judgement of internet sources, are developed alongside other subjects.

“We do a session in Year 7 where we talk about using the internet, and the best way to do it for research, and stuff, and it’s another skill, isn’t it, to learn, you know. If you were to just go round restricting what they could view then you’re not really doing them any favours, are you, in the real world?” (Teacher)

Some learners are critical about the number of ICT lessons they have.

“We have to take an ICT GCSE, but I think it’s going to be harder because we don’t actually have ICT lessons.” (Learner)

However, other learners are confident ICT users and were involved in helping teachers use online tools and in utilising these skills in project work (for example, creating a photo story for Discovery):

“In Discovery we had separate ICT lessons because Discovery is a mix of science, maths and we had to show the teachers like how to use audio editing software.” (Learner)

The VLE is also used when learners conduct independent research tasks in their subjects.

“I might split the group up. We give them job roles within their team, and I’d send the people who are the researchers, maybe for that project, to the laptops, and they’ll be researching certain bits to bring back to the rest of the group. So they’d use it as an independent research tool.” (Teacher)

Learners in the lower school claim to spend approximately 10–15 minutes on the VLE every day out of school hours, checking homework assignments, email, catching up on statuses of friends. Work required for school is generally submitted via email although once submitted and marked, this appears as a ‘completed assignment’ bar on their profile page. The time spent on the intranet when at home diminishes in the upper school, with some learners claiming never to access the VLE from home and suggesting that their parents have never received a log-in to the parent area of the portal (or that they deliberately did not give this information, which was sent home in the form of a printed letter, to their parents). Highly motivated and high achieving learners in the upper school say that they use the portal and go on their profile much more often and for more extended periods to revise, submit work, look at resources or remind themselves of assignments.

During assemblies, rules were set out about the use of the VLE, and learners were shown how to submit assignments or to use other tools on the VLE.

Parents and families

Currently parents are given their own passwords to access the VLE, and demand for access, especially from Year 7 parents, is increasing, according to a teacher-head of college.

Parents vary in terms of their perceived skills and competences in relation to computing and the internet. Communication with parents is done through newsletters and paper-based letters sent home. Email is also used widely for communication between the school and homes.

“My parents email the school quite a lot. Just like stuff... the Awards Evening tonight, just about tickets and sort of stuff which they need to know. I think they do get responses quite a lot, quite quick responses.” (Learner)

Parents are informed about the use of the VLE and the content they can access during parents’ evenings. The VLE is used in parent/tutor days.

“Yes, with the VLE and parents accessing it from home, one of the things that we found on the Discovery Parents’ Evening last year is that you sit down and talk to parents, and you say, ‘Right, you do know that for every project we have a home page, which has got all the information for that project on it?’ And 70,

80 per cent of parents, maybe more, didn't know that, and then obviously you're sat in school, and you can get it up on your laptop and show them how easy it is for them to access.” (Teacher – Head of College)

“Parents are constantly surprised, when you have them in for a parent/tutor evening, just how much they can get on to.” (Teacher)

The school is generally seen as being responsive to parents and also as keeping parents informed about learners' behaviour via a series of email or text messages on a sliding scale of C1 (verbal warning), C2 (detention), C3 (long detention), C4 (isolation). Parents can also email the school with responses or make appointments for parent–teacher meetings on the parent portal.

Learners are aware that their parents can access information about them on the VLE:

“There's a kind of website at home for parents to go on and they look at what you're doing and... And they get the homeworks that you haven't done so, say if you didn't do one and you didn't tell your parents, it would be on there, so they'll ask you.” (Learner)

“They show you, like when there's parents' evening, you can like choose your appointments with the different teachers online.” (Learner)

They raise concerns about a perceived breach of their privacy:

“Well, talking from experience, if you save the VLE as your profile thing in your favourites, and then they just go on to that. That's talking from experience, I'm never doing that again. No! She hacked into my account! I'm surprised she didn't put one of those status things in saying, 'Hi, it's my mum!' ” (Learner)

3. Benefits of using the learning platform

Findings from the case study are described below.

Increased involvement in civic life of the school

The visual appeal and commonality with popular internet formats such as Facebook mean that learners log on to their VLE profiles much more regularly. They enter through a customised year and college page, which has notices that are of immediate relevance to them in a 'banner' format and this means that many more of them respond to invitations to take up activities, and calls for volunteers and for opinions. There is also more consistent participation by learners in pastoral activities. The learners can now see exactly what activities apply to their year group, how many places are available, without having to search for that information, and they are more likely to become involved in activities.

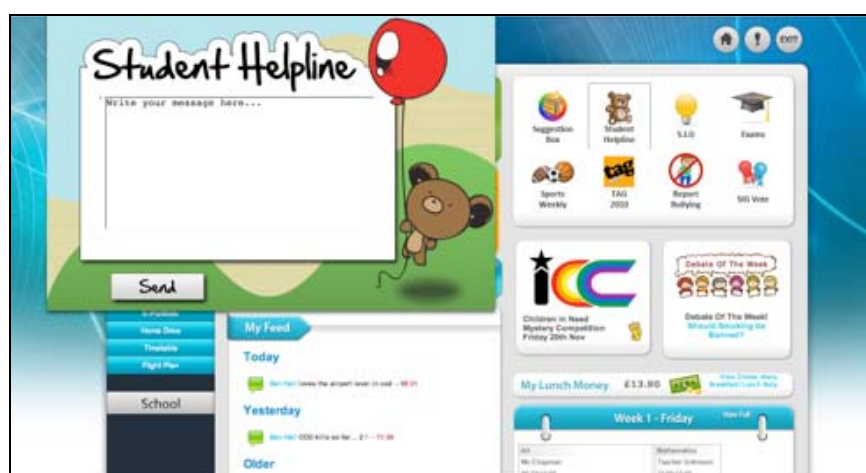
"Have you seen the social space, about the school TAG? That was like good because it's like, when you watch stuff like Waterloo Road and that and when you see all the graffiti and that. It's the graffiti but it's like the school. So it's like our own. It's like the children's, but it's just the teachers." (Learner)



The Student Portal

"So we use that through, we started an inter college championship. And we put stuff on the VLE, and we've only slipped it on in the morning, and thought nothing more of it, and then kids have started talking about it by the afternoon." (Teacher – Head of College)

“The VLE has been a very useful tool for the school, in terms of understanding, like the students’ viewpoints on things. We use a lot of things like surveys, forums, that kind of stuff, and it’s been a really useful tool for getting to know the students better, and getting to sort of, be inside their head a little bit more and understand what motivates them, understand what they’re interested in. And it’s been really good for getting feedback from them on things that have happened around school, what students like, and stuff like that.” (Teacher – Head of College)



The Student Helpline – confidential messaging via VLE

Increased involvement of students in tutorial activities

Organisation of processes and communication of information has become easier with the use of the platform. Due to their quick uptake of clear information on the VLE, involvement by learners in tutorial activities is increased, although this applies more to lower than upper school, according to teachers and Heads of College. Staff also can be certain that if they put a 'note' on someone's profile or on a class or college page, learners will see it and take note.

“The TAG, it’s just a tool that’s made it a lot easier for them. You know, it’s what they’re used to, isn’t it, looking at things online, making a decision, entering a choice and a preference, and stuff. And that kind of stuff that previously would have been, I guess, a bit of a nightmare administratively, has been really easy.” (Teacher)

“The VLE has been really good, in terms of just getting information out of the kids. We put things on there and they know about it before you even realise.” (Teacher)

“And what I did was, at the start I thought, ‘Right, I either let all of the students add me as a friend, or none of them’, so I went for all of them, because I just thought the more, like, I can know about the kids the better.” (Teacher)

Improved organisation of resources

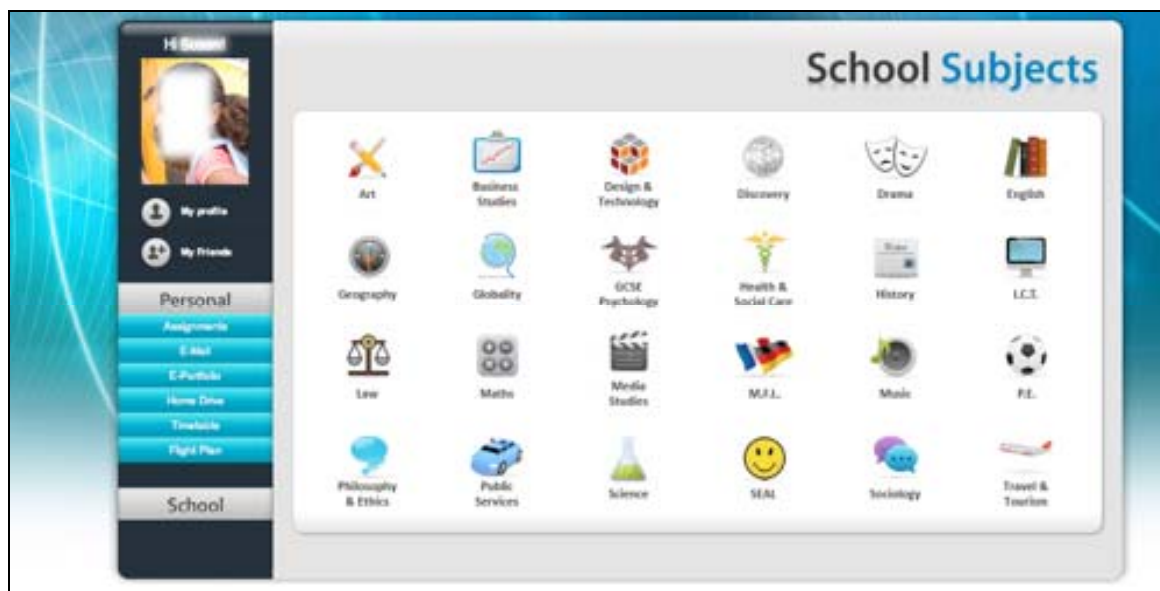
Teachers can now set up entire units with a particular visual design and context, linked to objectives, revision and learner self-evaluations, which is more child-friendly (the Gothic unit in English, for example) rather than having many separate documents which each have to be opened to see what it is and no online information on how it links to other pieces of work in a particular unit.

Learners can keep track of their responsibilities, such as deadlines and dinner money more easily through their personal profiles.

“We go on it... well not in Discovery but... when you’re doing homework at home, it helps you to like remember what you’ve done.” (Learner)

“Well I would say that the thing that is most useful for learning is the assignments...if you’ve forgotten the paper then they normally email you the Word document and so that’s quite useful...” (Learner)

Learners also have easy access to subject areas and online resources.



Subject areas are easy to identify with child-friendly icons

Quick and efficient communication of information

Access to resources and lesson materials from home, as well as at school, is appreciated. Access to materials by all stakeholders also ensures that education is consistent.

“It just means that when students in GCSE, especially if they’re away, I’ve told the parents that’s where they can access the lessons. They can always stay after school, but I know they can access it and they know exactly where the thing is. I can update, I put all my lessons on after each lesson I teach.”
(Assistant Head)

“Yes, and it also means it’s a place where if somebody’s going to teach that set of lessons next year that isn’t me, I can direct them to it without having to fiddle about with things.” (Assistant Head)

“And I think it’s because it’s easy to access from home, you just go on to the internet and the VLE link is there. It means I can put things on and I know that all students have no excuse because they can access it.” (Assistant Head)

The learning platform and email system have improved communication and enable learners to feed back to staff members about various issues and to ask questions more easily. In turn, teachers get to know learners better.

“They will go and look at the lessons and if they have any questions come back to me, do any tasks that are set, so it gives the chance.” (Assistant Head)

Tracking learners’ work and behaviour

At any given time, a tutor or a head of college can track individual learners in terms of their homework assignments (which are logged on their VLE profiles) to see who has handed in and who has not, what has been marked and how many were late. Behaviour incidents do not appear on individual profiles although ‘reminders about detentions’ do. Behaviour incidents stored in the MIS can be marshalled for parents at short notice to support parent–staff meetings and communications. The personal areas on the VLE can be also used for showcasing and sharing learners’ work. In addition, the uploading to the learning platform of online learning objectives (rubrics) in some subjects is said to be very helpful for learners in knowing what they are doing well and pointing them to things they still need to do and to revise on the VLE.

“In terms of the data management, you know, we can spot a problem and an area that we’d like to identify.” (Teacher)

Development of digital literacy skills

Learners are involved in discussions around the use of internet sources and learn to be critical.

“I think that is a skill, isn’t it, that students are not necessarily better at but more aware of than many of, like our older generation, and stuff. And I do think it’s a bad thing to just restrict them, I think it’s better for them to have the access to it, and discuss why it’s not always the best thing to click on the first link that comes up when you Google something, and discuss that.” (Teacher)

Parental involvement

Parents are informed about their child’s work and progress and therefore can get more involved in their learning. In this way, the school also gets feedback from parents.

“You saw those Rubrics, and for parents to know what it is their child needs to do, how they’re being assessed, and where they’re up to, that’s been probably the most significant bit of it all, because then they really understand what their child is trying to do to get to the next level within science, and stuff.” (Teacher – Head of College)

“You get a lot more, kind of, input from parents, and a lot better communication with them, because they know exactly where their children are at.” (Teacher – Head of College)

“They are often surprised when they ask, just how much they have access to.” (Teacher)

The use of the learning platform as well as the MIS (to which parents have a log-in through parent portal) has allowed parents to be shown a wider range of issues and incidents to do with their own children’s behaviour and learning, should they so desire.

Enabling more inclusive education

Using the VLE appeals to learners with different learning styles and makes accessibility easier for learners who found the previous platform difficult to use.

“This group that I’ve just had now are kind of, C, D, borderline maths kids, and I know some of them that have been on the VLE and accessed past papers on there, and my instinct is they wouldn’t have done that if it wouldn’t have been so easy for them to do it, because it is easier through the VLE.” (Teacher)

“And you tend to find that the higher ability students develop that skill faster, and are more critical of what they see, and they question it as well. And you know, it worked really, really well, and we did end up talking about some stuff that they wouldn’t have even touched on if it was just the normal, you know, they’d have skimmed through the easier stuff and carried on.” (Teacher)

Motivation for learning

The variety of resources motivates students' in their learning.

“Because you had presentations and that. It would have been a bit longer and a bit boringer [sic] with just books and things.” (Learner)

4. Challenges and solutions

The open discussion forums were very heavily (and sometimes inappropriately) used by learners when they were un-moderated. Although there were some good ideas, inappropriate use annoyed the leadership team because it reflected badly on the school's image. The school's experiences with forums and spam messages and a cautious attitude on the part of senior staff have meant that general discussion forums have been removed from the school site and the intranet and there is now much less traffic on the subject forums, which attract only a small minority of learners, mainly children who are good at their work and like using them. However, the e-learning team want to open forums again with assigned learners as moderators. A similar issue is related to learners sending emails in class, which for staff adds another concern alongside the use of mobile phones.

A more pressing challenge is the aging of the laptops, the intermittent broadband access and the fact that the school is 'penalised' for its good results by a lack of resourcing from the local authority. This needs to be addressed in the coming months as the children do become frustrated and staff de-motivated in relation to using the learning platform for teaching when the internet does not work in specific classes or computers break down and stall.

Issues with the use of the network which hindered training for staff were reported by the Assistant Head but the technical team in the school is dealing with these.

Learners and some staff members expressed their disagreement with the blocking of internet sites by the school as a result of inappropriate use. The e-learning team and those who are at ease with learners' popular culture in the school feel that the leadership team have mixed views with regard to the way forward for the learning platform. Some are more open than others to the best and most beneficial uses of Web 2.0 applications for learning. Apparently, caution still rules too many decisions: too many sites that would be really helpful are currently censored for fear of scandal or danger. Twitter and YouTube have links but cannot be accessed by learners. The internet is heavily censored and the teachers simply do not have enough time to search for the best links and resources and upload them to the intranet and the VLE. "One negative incident with one learner messes it all up for the remaining 1,499 learners". However, having the VLE is seen to be a huge success and, despite its cost, to be much more effective and motivational than the previous free VLE.

"What annoys me about a website is like, say if you want like a music video and you go on YouTube, that is all blocked. You can't go on YouTube." (Learner)

"I think what we maybe don't take advantage enough of is ease of access for the students, so you know, I wouldn't guess percentage-wise, but the number of students that walk around with an iPod Touch, or iPhone, or a PSP, or DS that could potentially access school systems, and access their emails, and

stuff, on the move, and we don't do that, really. You know, we don't give the password out for the network, to the kids, and I just think, medium to long-term that's not a way that you're going to be able to go with information systems, and stuff, is it? You think about how much collaboration the kids do, and things like YouTube, where they're all creating videos, and uploading videos, and they have all these skills." (Teacher)

5. Drivers

The presence of an experienced and enthusiastic e-learning coordinator who has a holistic approach to the technology in the school, as well as of a learning platform-friendly Assistant Headteacher with a long history at the school and good knowledge of the children and the curriculum have been key factors driving the school's technology strategy. The school's use of champions in different departments has so far paid off in that most staff began to use the learning platform and upload resources although they were not told that they had to do this.

6. Conditions for success

The college system is said to work to build the children's sense of community and responsibility towards each other. The younger children in focus group interviews expressed their liking for the mixed-age tutor groups and for the new learning platform profiles which allow them to put up 'statuses'. This clever approach, which has made the learning platform more inviting to the children by using iconography and cues they are familiar with from out-of-school website culture, is working well to embed the learning platform within the lower years. The school has tailored its learning platform to the civic life of the school and this has apparently been a key factor in making the children who use it return again and again. The current learning platform is seen (by staff and younger learners) to be much more visually appealing for learners, and the individual profiles can be customised by learners with a photo and status as well as a personal file area where they can keep all their ongoing and submitted assignments. This is also popular and learners experiment with updating their profile.

Many of the initiatives described as having improved behaviour and learning or achievement at the school are to do with complicated mixtures of technology, people, pedagogy and ethos, and cannot be attributed solely to the learning platform. However, having confident, technology savvy people on the senior management team has considerably eased the school's efforts in relation to employing the learning platform.

7. Lessons learnt and future plans

Movement between systems has been a learning process for those staff members involved.

“The new VLE has been a big improvement. But if you’d asked me a year ago whether I think our system was quite good, I would have said ‘I think it’s pretty good and it’s going all right’, so until you kind of know what the next step is, you never know what you’re missing out on, a little bit.” (Teacher)

The Assistant Head described as one of the future plans the development of web pages within the VLE, which can be used also as e-portfolios by learners, for their work. Creating web pages in the VLE was described as straightforward, which is something that will support and enable learners to work independently.